

Average Daily Patient Loads for RN and LPN Staff Nurses

Staff nurses were asked, “On an average day, how many patients are you responsible for?” Their answers ranged widely. Tables 1, 2 and 3 report the average values reported by RNs and LPNs, depending on their work setting, along with the confidence intervals around those mean values. As expected, given the intensity of care needed by hospital patients, staff nurses in hospital in-patient settings reported a significantly smaller average daily patient load, compared to staff nurses in other types of settings.

It is important to note that this measure of patient load is not related to facility-generated measures of patient load such as an average daily census or nurse to patient ratios. Those types of measures can often be misleading for hospital nurses since they usually count the number of patients at midnight, which does not reflect the rapid turnover of patients during a 12 hour shift. By asking nurses to report the number of patients for which they are responsible, the patient load measure in this report is a more accurate reflection of a staff nurse’s workload and is consistently defined across all types of settings.

Table 1. Average daily patient load and 95% confidence interval by setting type for RN and LPN staff nurses

Setting Type:	Staff RNs			Staff LPNs		
	Group N	Average Patient Load	95% Confidence Interval	Group N	Average Patient Load	95% Confidence Interval
Hospital In-Patient	178	8.5	7.2 – 9.7	43	9.3	7.5 – 11.2
Long Term Care	9	24.7	16.4 – 32.9	90	33.1	30.1 – 36.0
Community Settings	111	19.2	16.8 – 21.6	110	28.0	25.3 – 30.7

Setting is the most important determinant in the size of the average daily patient load reported. RN and LPN staff nurses tend to have similar sized patient loads when they work in the same type of setting. See Tables 2 and 3 below for the comparisons. For those in hospital in-patient settings, RN staff nurses on critical care units have the smallest daily patient loads (2.8 on average) while RNs in emergency departments have the largest (21.7 on average). For staff nurses in community settings, the smallest patient loads are seen by RNs in home care settings. Not surprisingly, the largest patient loads are handled by staff nurses in medical offices or occupational health settings.

Patient loads were also examined by region to determine if there are differences in the way nurses are utilized in different parts of the state. Regional comparisons were made within setting types for both RNs and LPNs. The only regional difference found was that the average daily patient load of 35.1 reported by LPNs in medical office practices in the Western region is significantly higher than the 24.4 reported by LPNs in the Central region. Those in the East fall in between with an average daily patient load of 27.7.